

THE 'HEMELITE' BRANCH

*- rescuing an entire class without
realising it nor even intending to do so!*

By Brian E Howard

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During a machinery purchasing expedition to Bairds and Scottish Steel my late father and I had to change trains at Glasgow Central, off the Kettering-boarded Anglo-Scottish sleeper on which we had rested rather than slept. We were on our way from Bedford to survey Michigan Loading Shovels and 25-ton dump trucks which had been advertised for sale and which we wanted to use in the building block factories which we owned in the Midlands to load and haul aggregates into the plants.

Then, as now, Michigan Loaders were expensive pieces of tackle, so the 275/A models on offer gave us the chance to move ten cubic yards in each bucketful for the same outlay as for much smaller new machines. Our judgements were therefore to be centred on age, condition and price. Good deals were struck, and three shovels and two dump trucks remained in our service for the next ten years. But these are not the central mechanical characters of the story.

During that change at Glasgow Central an early morning suburban three or four-coach train glided in behind the most exquisite symmetry of the engine designers' craft a Class 17 Type 2 Clayton Bo-Bo, in a mid-green colour. She was beautiful and at that time the main shortcoming of this class as far as Scottish train operators were concerned low power (only 900hp) - was then unknown to me. But largely because of this lack of power and the switch to EMU and DMU operations, the remaining life of this class was destined to be brief and they were to be discarded with much work still left in them.

Back in 1959, as the fifth large factory in our growing chain of clinker block factories, I had designed and built a new works at Hemel Hempstead, at Claydales to the east of the town. The location was chosen because of the buoyant and growing demand for blocks in the South Midlands and Home Counties; also this site, being of the former eponymous brickworks, presented no planning difficulties and it was rail served by the Harpenden to Hemel Hempstead branch.

Rates were quoted from BR by Claud Peaty, then at Lincoln and later to move to Nottingham, and Hugh Hammett in London for between twelve and twenty of the ubiquitous sixteen-ton mineral wagons a day from our despatch station outside Staythorpe Power Station, near Newark, and from our Rotherham clinker ash depot. We had to pile it high to get the full tonnage into each wagon, I recall. Sometimes we may have overdone it slightly, but as doors leaked and the ash shook down in transit we had to start off 'well topped up'.

From a series of sketches, and with the aid of a vast splendid Meccano set given me by my father when I was ten, I designed a double-ended end wire rope wagon tippler to give a rail or road intake to the factory. Later, this machine was converted to hydraulic action and increased to take 24½ ton minerals, and renamed the 'Trucks-a-Daisy'. Howards' own engineering workshops built and sold dozens of these throughout the UK over the next twenty years and they were installed from Aberdeen to Southampton and Swansea to Ipswich.

At Hemelite internal shunting was carried out by an eight-ton diesel Simplex between our new exchange sidings and the discharge, the trains being delivered to us daily by a Luton or Cricklewood-shedded 2-6-2T, a 3 or 4F 0-6-0 or, latterly a Standard 4MT 2-6-0. There was a little, mainly domestic, coal traffic up to Godwins Halt, but Dickinsons' paper traffic in box vans was the other main user of the goods-only branch.

Rationalisation', that evil word which hides so much failure to hold on to markets and retain rail traffic, led to Dickinsons' work being shifted to the West Coast Main Line where it was less convenient for the customer. The result was it was soon all lost to road. The new Watford

Coal Concentration depot attracted the trickle of coal away from Godwins, leaving us as the only customer of a seven-mile line with ruling gradients of 1 in 39.

We were told that the branch would have to close because working it was no longer economic yet we had spent £100,000 in installing new sidings, discharge and on a new shunter only four years earlier. Did that count for nothing, I asked? Helpfully E. E. (Ted) Burgis, R. L. E. Lawrence and Hugh Hammett of BR suggested we take over the line and operate it as a seven-mile siding. This was examined against the road options open to ourselves. We were helped by the availability of a number of BR 0-6-0 204hp Drewry diesel shunters of which two were selected and bought by our company. This had now been renamed 'Hemelite Blocks' as the full title of Hemel Hempstead Lightweight Concrete Limited was so unwieldy as never to be expected to trip off the tongue, accurate as it was as to the company's activities.

The change of status from branch to siding meant that the exchange of traffic between ourselves and BR moved eastwards by seven miles, from our works sidings to the length of single line immediately north of Harpenden Junction.

Wagon exchange now took place overnight, usually around 1.00am, when the considerable occupancy across all four tracks could be tolerated. The loaded wagons were held at Luton Crescent Road from where the southbound pick-up ran the raft to Harpenden. The exchange was made more lengthy by the task of drawing out the empties on to the main line before the loaded ones could be propelled up the branch. The need to attend to the brake van and the southwards-facing connection of the branch added to the complexity of the operation. However, as far as BR was concerned it worked and brought it £60,000 to £100,000 worth of business a year more than the branch had ever generated in its life.

For us as building blockmakers I found myself as Chief Civil and Mechanical Engineer of a considerable length of line. We had recruited driver Ken Alien, formerly of St Albans Loco, as our driver who was a most reliable and amiable colleague, but he had his work cut out because a 204hp 0-6-0 could only take seven sixteen-ton wagons to ensure mastery of the two severe gradients up to Roundwood Halt and down before Redbourn station. That was in the dry; in wet autumns, the conditions reduced this by a wagon or two.

Starting each morning from Hemelite, Ken Alien ran light engine down to the Junction where he coupled up the end seven full wagons, hauling the first 112 tons of aggregate of the day to the works. If fifteen or more wagons had arrived, the Drewry made two more such journeys before reversing the flow. The empties could be propelled no more than ten at a time, not because of weight but because of driver's visibility. This meant that for 21 or more daily wagons, the Drewry had to make at least six complete double trips. Later use of larger 21 and 24ton wagons improved the operation slightly. We also had incidents including the occasional derailment to cope with. A little-used branch, particularly at weekends, acted as a most effective 'Pied-Piper' for school children and for Travellers'. The former researched how heavy items had to be to achieve a derailment, whilst oak keys found a ready market as kindling wood among the mobile fraternity.

The needs of track repairs and general bush clearances meant we had to get tools and jacks and all supplies down the line from our Works. The cab of the Drewrys was tiny and not an adequate tool wagon.

With these problems to be overcome, I recalled my earlier sighting of that Clayton Bo-Bo. Here was an engine of more than four times the power and braking weight. It was a bogie vehicle, better able to follow the indifferent patches of our track and as a huge bonus had a cab the size of a five-ton pick-up truck.

Using my former buying contacts I returned to Scotland, visiting Polmadie shed with a supervisor, and ran the rule over the best available - No.D8568; another deal was struck. A most helpful reception at the shed led to my getting a host of spares for the Clayton including a spare Paxman 450hp engine, with numerous brake, electrical and transmission assemblies all of which accompanied the locomotive, under its own power, on its journey south up the Midland main line in an XP fitted van.

The opportunity to ride my purchase when delivery day drew near was too much. Thanks to Leicester's kindly bearded Station Inspector Smith, formerly of the ex-GCR line, in the wee small hours of a Sunday night I boarded my locomotive under Leicester's all-over roof and shared the cab

from there to Bedford. She rode as beautifully as she looked, reaching nearly 70mph down from Sharnbrook summit - the last time she would ever be allowed to stretch her legs, I remember musing at the time. As I stepped on to the ballast to alight on the Bedford avoiding line near my home, dawn was breaking and our use of rail for bulk aggregates looked assured for the mid-term. I crept into my bed very tired but satisfied.

On the branch she (although officially named after my son Gavin!) did all that was expected of her, increasing the loaded payload to sixteen wagons, but the driver's visibility was not better when propelling, of course.

The philosophy of this two-engined diesel-electric was that either engine could power any of the four motors. She could therefore serve us well even with one engine down and I engaged the services of the late Alf Sibley of Bedford MPD in advising us as to maintenance. Compared with the 0-6-0 straight diesel-mechanicals we had operated and which our lorry workshop could understand and cope with - they even shared Gardner diesel power - the Clayton was the combination of a mobile power station and a two-compartment box of many tricks. We changed one engine at Redbourn station yard which Ken Allen did almost single-handed as I recall, one hot summer.

Meanwhile the BR rationalisers had another bite at self-destruction. Their new 'gofer' at Euston, a Thurston Adburgham, brought me the news that electrification of the Midland Main Line would not include provision for the track and signalling serving the branch unless we paid for it - and the sum was outrageous. I replied that the MML and its connections were BR's assets not Hemelite's - and as haulage contractors BR had to live in the real world.

Certainly electrification, regardless of our traffic, would go ahead; meanwhile rail rates had been progressively lifted to levels that meant our works would be better and more cheaply served by road in future.

I sold Clayton *Gavin* D8568 to Tunnel Cement and the Drewrys to the North Yorkshire Moors Railway where my dear friends John Bellwood and Capt. Bill Smith were to see all three later united during a summer's services. My company had tried but failed to keep the traffic on rail, but at least unknowingly I had saved the Clayton Class 17 from extinction in the process.

When you drive down the M1 the branch's route passes underneath between Junctions 9 and 8. It now forms a rural walk encompassing the Redbourn bypass for some of its length.